

<BOOK REVIEWS>From White to Yellow : The  
Japanese in European Racial Thought, 1300 1735  
By Rotem Kowner

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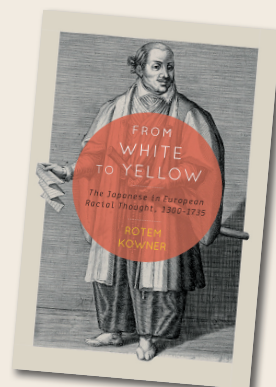
## BOOK REVIEW

*From White to Yellow:  
The Japanese in European Racial  
Thought, 1300–1735*

By Rotem Kowner

McGill-Queen's University Press, 2014  
712 pages.

Reviewed by Tarik MERIDA



*From White to Yellow* is the first part of a two-volume project in which Rotem Kowner attempts to retrace the history of the “racial” encounter between Japan and the West. The scale of sources Kowner uses can only be deemed impressive, as testified by the bibliography of one hundred pages. Hence, the reader is taken from Marco Polo’s travel report through Carl Linnaeus’ *Systema Naturae* (1735) to seventeenth-century Jesuit writings. The amount and diversity of sources (many of which are difficult to obtain in English translation) are the work’s greatest strength.

Kowner divides his book into three chronologically ordered phases. The first one (1300–1543), that of “speculation,” is focused on the initial encounter of Europeans with Japan. Racial writings on the Japanese during this phase are deemed rudimentary (p. 61) and the main factor that shaped European views of the Japanese was their association with the less elusive Chinese (p. 63). Phase two (1543–1640), the age of “observation,” is equivalent to the so-called “Christian century.” It is the most enlightening part of the book, as Kowner bases his analysis not only on the writings of eminent Jesuits but also of Portuguese and Dutch merchants. The reader is also offered fascinating insights into the influence of slavery and sexual encounters on the overall appraisal of the Japanese, but is left wanting for explicit references to “race,” a problem that holds true for the whole work and will be discussed in greater detail below. The third phase (1640–1735) of “reconsideration” sees the birth of a more “scientific” approach to racial thought and also the appearance of the color yellow as a somatic marker.

Unfortunately, despite Kowner’s claim that his book is foremost about race (p. 21), it is difficult to find solid references to the concept. None of the sources he presents are convincing examples in support of his main argument, namely that “the European encounter with the Japanese . . . serves as a compelling case study that sheds new light . . . on the sources but also motives of modern racial thought” (pp. 3–4). The obvious complication Kowner faces—and acknowledges—is to discuss “race” in a time when the concept itself was nonexistent. He tries to avoid this by referring to a variety of racial “rudiments” which form a racial discourse about a certain group. This discourse is made racial by “describing some aspects of their physical appearance, offering details about their

origins to allow classification, or providing some information and even forming judgment that facilitates their placement on a scale of achievement” (p. 7).

However, his approach presents a major conceptual problem: the process of describing physical appearance or classifying people is not racial *per se*. It is the nature of the arguments that are being used to describe or classify a group that can eventually make the discourse racial. Hence, it is not clear in Kowner’s definition how the racial discourse he sees differs from a discourse based on religion or culture—both particularly relevant for this book—or eventually on gender or class. The comprehension is not made easier by his assumption that the “premodern” racial discourse only differs from the modern one in that it did not contain notions of immutability and heritability (p. 8). One is left to wonder what, if not these two notions, is supposed to make a discourse racial.<sup>1</sup>

This conceptual weakness makes Kowner’s racial labelling of the sources he describes seem rather arbitrary. Take the example of Marco Polo’s remark about the inhabitants of Cipangu (Japan) as “white, civilized, and well-favored” (p. 40). Kowner sees this as racial in character and crucial for the ensuing discourse. But what exactly makes “white” in this particular context a racial connotation? The argument that before the eighteenth century white skin color was often associated with a high level of cultural attainment seems out of place here (p. 40). While it could without doubt be argued that culture and race were overlapping concepts in the eighteenth century, the same would be difficult to say for the thirteenth century in which notions of race did not exist. Moreover, it is important to remember that Marco Polo never went to Cipangu himself; everything he wrote about the Japanese was thus hearsay and may just be a translation. In the same vein, it is unclear to what extent the sources had an impact on the whole European image of the Japanese as a people, let alone as a race. For example, who had direct access to Jesuit reports and could comprehend them?

Finally, it remains vague why, except for the intrinsic value of novelty, the focus is put on Japan. Kowner concludes that the pre-1735 discourse on the Japanese shows that the concept of race “requires a certain contact and familiarity between observers and their target” (p. 309), an assumption that rings true, but is not peculiar to the Japanese case. Furthermore, the argument that Japan “delayed the consolidation of a world view that placed Europeans at its apex” (p. 325) out of respect for its achievements is novel, but it ignores the fact that the Japanese were not the only non-white people who were granted a racial moratorium.<sup>2</sup> Factors such as the Japanese domestic policy that forbade contact with foreign nations, a still premature technological level that prevented easy access to and frequent contact with Japan, and foremost a lack of scientific apparatus, seem more intuitive to explain the belated appearance of a hierarchy dominated solely by Europeans.

*From White to Yellow* is an ambitious and impressive work, and it is unfortunate that it displays some conceptual shortcomings. The breadth of sources as well as the extensive period of time it covers make it mandatory reading for those interested in cultural confrontations and in the Japanese image in the European mind. However, those curious

1 Kowner does mention factors such as a description of physical and behavioral characteristics, acknowledgement of the inferiority of certain groups, and so on (p. 8). However, these factors are in no instance specific to a racial discourse.

2 Native Americans too went through a phase of being first categorized as “white” (with everything this implied) before being darkened. For details, see, for example, Vaughan 1982.

about the concept of race and the racial identity of Japan will probably have to consider consulting additional works as well. It is to be hoped that volume II of Kowner's book project will be exempt from the shortcomings mentioned here, since the time period under scrutiny itself offers a clearer conceptual framework.

## REFERENCES

Vaughan 1982

Alden T. Vaughan. "From White Man to Redskin: Changing Anglo-American Perceptions of the American Indian." *The American Historical Review* 87:4 (October 1982), pp. 917–53.